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CAFE wisdom

Rep. Sweeney sees the light on mileage standards, and could play a key role in raising them

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t's good to hear Rep. John Sweeney, R-Clifton Park, calling for higher gasoline mileage standards for passenger cars, light trucks, minivans and SUVs. There was a time when Mr. Sweeney, who is one of the more influential Republicans in Congress, sided with the automakers, arguing that higher standards would disrupt the free market and cost American jobs. But now, with gasoline prices hovering around \$3 or more a gallon, Mr. Sweeney is joining other Republicans to support legislation advanced by Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-New Hartford, and Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass.

An article last Sunday by Judy Holland of the Times Union Washington bureau quotes Mr. Sweeney as acknowledging the need for change: "We're going to have to force ourselves to accept certain sacrifices. A laissez-faire approach isn't going to work here." But what approach will work? And at what sacrifice?

At present, Congress sets the standards for passenger cars, while the White House sets the rules for light trucks, minivans and SUVs. That makes no sense. The Boehlert-Markey bill rightly seeks to have Congress establish standards for all vehicles. But Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, has introduced legislation that would give the White House the power to set standards for all vehicles, including passenger cars. And to compound matters, 10 states, including New York, have gone to court to try to force toughen mileage standards. So gridlock is a possibility.

In truth, though, neither Congress nor the White House has a good record on fuel efficiency. Congress hasn't significantly raised what are known as Corporate Average Fuel Economy, or CAFE, standards in 20 years. And it was only recently that the Transportation Department announced higher standards -- though far from adequate -- for light trucks, minivans and SUVs.

Regrettably, the Boehlert-Markey legislation, though welcome and well intended, calls for all vehicles to average 33 miles per gallon by 2015, up from 27.5 today. That's too long, and the goal is too modest. Meanwhile, Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta wants a dual system -- one for big cars, another for smaller ones -- that would eliminate what Mr. Mineta sees as an incentive for manufacturers to produce small cars to offset poor fuel efficiency in larger vehicles. Maybe, but isn't an incentive to build small cars a good thing?

All this presents an opportunity for Mr. Sweeney. He enjoys a close working relationship with the White House and he is an upstate New York congressman like Rep. Boehlert. That puts him in a unique position to use his influence to help forge a uniform, sensible

CAFE policy -- one that balances sacrifices today against the long-term benefits of reducing dependence on foreign oil.